

# Philosophic Planning Framework

## 1. Identifying powerful underlying ideas.

***What underlying ideas or theories seem best able to organize the topic into some coherent whole? What are the most powerful, clear, and relevant theories, ideologies, metaphysical schemes, or meta-narratives?***

These theories may be political, economic, social, literary, philosophical, or any other kind that claim to explain the material to be learned. The core task in teaching through this framework is to clarify and make conscious those schemes, ideas, or theories (which may or may not have been evident to students before) and to enable students to recognize them as undergirding the area they are learning about, and to begin to question them. One way that might help the teacher to focus on the powerful underlying ideas is to consider the main controversies surrounding the topic—what do people generally argue about?

**The most powerful underlying idea or theory in this topic:**

**An alternative:**

## 2. Organizing the content into a theoretic structure

### 2.1. Initial access

***How can the underlying theory or idea be made vivid? What content best exposes it and shows its power to organize the topic?***

In this section we plan what will form the basis of the first teaching act of our unit or lesson. So, having identified the most powerful underlying theory or idea, the teacher's next job is to reflect on the topic as a whole and locate some aspect of it in which the theory or idea is most vividly clear. Usually this will be something that is central and profound about the topic. Often this will require us to look at the context of the topic in the area of knowledge of which it is a part. So, if looking at, say, the French Revolution in history, we might begin by reflecting on the nature of revolutions in general, or on differences and similarities among social, political, religious, cultural, economic, or other kinds of revolution. This will encourage students to develop theories about revolutions in general, which will generate an abstract, theoretic context for the particular study of the French Revolution. Alternatively, we could focus on the particulars of the revolution

itself, asking the students to reflect on whether it was a tragic event in European history, with some possibly good effects, or whether it was a liberating and progressive event in European history, with some regrettable excesses. Alternatively, we could locate a very powerful representation, written or visual, that vividly exposes the theory or idea we want to use as an organizer of the content. Read from Dickens's description of Madam Defarge knitting as the guillotine sliced aristocratic heads into the basket in front of her, and reflect on the revolution from her perspective. This is, as with the previous frameworks, often the most difficult, but crucial, part of applying the framework.

**Content that exposes the scheme or theory most vividly:**

## **2.2. Organizing the body of the lesson or unit**

***What meta-narrative provides a clear overall structure to the lesson or unit?***

Here we are requested to take the powerful general idea or theory we have identified above and use it to shape the structure of our lesson or unit of study into a coherent whole. Continuing the French Revolution example, we might select as most useful for our purposes to adopt the theory that the revolution was a catastrophic event in European history, because it ruptured the traditional foundations of society, and gave birth to the Terror and to dictatorship and hugely destructive wars. Having chosen this theory, we can build a meta-narrative account of the whole revolution that selects facts, events, etc. to highlight this particular view and build it as the Truth about the revolution. In other subjects, such as the sciences, for example, such a heavily loaded ideological position will not be usual, but there are equivalents in all areas of knowledge. Remember, putting the content into a (meta-) narrative form helps to engage students' emotions. That is, if the selected meta-narrative seems not to capture any idea that stimulates the students or the teacher, then the teacher needs to delve deeper, or delve elsewhere in the topic.

**Lay out the content that will present a strong meta-narrative of the topic:**

### 3. Introducing anomalies to the theory

***What content is anomalous to the general idea or theory? How can one begin with minor anomalies and gradually and sensitively challenge the students' general theory so that they make the theory increasingly sophisticated?***

General ideas or theories attempt to provide a total explanation of the topic, but can't. The teacher needs to focus attention on particular facts or events that present a challenge to the claim of the idea or theory to explain the Truth about the topic. What does the theory explain well and what does it fail to adequately explain? In the case of the French Revolution, the teacher will focus attention on those aspects of the topic that clearly are anomalous to the meta-narrative created so far. So the teacher will ask the students to look at the abuses of the old regime, and at the many failed attempts to reform them. Then they might focus students' attention on the Napoleonic legal reforms, the removal of penalties against Jews, and other reforms that ushered in more liberal government and greater freedom for much of the population. The aim, remember, is not to persuade the students to switch from one meta-narrative to another, but rather to change their understanding of the status of meta-narratives.

**List the main anomalies to the meta-narrative:**

### 4. Presenting alternative general theories.

***What alternative general theories can organize the topic? What alternative meta-narrative can organize the topic? Which can best be used to help students see something about the nature and limitations of their theories and meta-narratives?***

What are some other theories that may explain the same phenomena? Help students compare their coherence and explanatory power. In some curriculum areas this will be easier than others, but it is possible in all areas of knowledge. While it may be relatively easy to shift from looking at the last years of the Chinese empire from the perspective of a Western liberal to that of an archconservative Madarin to that of a Marxist enemy of the old regime, we can find analogous alternative views about all meta-narratives.

**Indicate the alternatives theories or meta-narratives that will be used:**

## **5. Encouraging development of students' sense of agency**

***What features of the knowledge will best allow us to encourage the students' developing sense of agency?***

Teaching at this level is not only ensuring the mastery of knowledge in various areas but is concerned with ensuring that what is being learned is seen by the student as tying them to the knowledge by causal networks. Some part of the unit should focus on what the students can do with relation to the topic. While learning about acid rain or other science topics may seem straightforwardly to lead to thinking about what actions one might take in the world that the knowledge one is learning empowers one to take, it might seem unlikely that learning about history could yield the same sense of agency. But in any area of knowledge, the meta-narrative one has used will have public implications—knowledge of the French Revolution might encourage radical, conservative, or liberal ideas that can become a part of the student's power to articulate and take a part in social and political plans of action.

**List areas in which students' sense of agency can be engaged and encouraged:**

## **6. Conclusion**

***How can we ensure that the student's theories or general ideas are not destroyed but are recognized as having a different status from the facts they are based on? How can we ensure that the decay of***

***belief in the Truth of theories or general ideas does not lead to disillusion and alienation?***

The direction we want to take students through units and lessons at this level is constantly one that shows that the theories and general ideas that we help them develop and use in learning are not themselves like the facts and events that constitute the foundation of their study. In the earlier period when students are developing theoretic thinking we will want to downplay a little the challenges to their theories, ideas, ideologies, metaphysical schemes, meta-narratives, etc. With students who have already moved some way in the fluency with which they use theoretic thinking we may work harder at providing anomalies and alternatives. In concluding any unit or lesson, however, we will want to at least give strong hints about the difference between the theory that engages their emotions and the facts that support it, or support it in part, or fail to support it convincingly. Teachers will need to be sensitive to the state of students' theories and encourage their development while also showing their inadequacy as claims to Truth.

**What concluding activity will help to both support and show problems with students' theories, ideas, met-narratives, ideologies, etc.:**

**6. Evaluation**

***How can we know whether the content has been learned and understood, whether students have developed a theory or general idea, elaborated it, and attained some sense of its limitations?***

We will want evidence that students have learned the content that has made up the lesson or unit of study. This can be attained by use of any of a variety of traditional techniques. We will also want evidence about how adequately students have developed some theory or general idea and used it in organizing the content they have learned. This could be evaluated in part by examining students' writing or oral discussions to see whether the theoretic language appropriate to the topic is deployed flexibly and correctly. One would also be able to judge to what degree students successfully generated order in the content by application of a general scheme to it. One could examine their written work also for evidence of increasing elaboration of their theories or general ideas in light of anomalies. Either casual cynicism about, or committed devotion to, the truth of some scheme would indicate failures of teaching and learning, though unqualified commitment during the early period should not be a cause of much

worry. A general evaluation of how readily and fluently students use abstract ideas, and how committed they are to their use as a means of gaining a flexible understanding of the world can be relatively easily read from their work and discussions. While relatively easy to gain a general sense of such understanding, it is also difficult to be precise in scoring such readings. It would be useful perhaps to have rather gross categories in a continuum, from “Easy & Flexible” to “Adequate” to “Inadequate,” available for teachers to score in evaluating students’ performance. In part, such scales would be useful in sensitizing teachers to this dimension of students’ performance.

**What forms of evaluation will give adequate evidence that the students have learned and understood the content and also have developed and used some theory or abstract idea:**